

Of Biggs Richard and Mr

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for

Mr. Hughes Allison
144 Steuben Street
East Orange
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FIRST
FIRST

The New York Times

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Drama Department,
December 15, 1942.

Dear Mr. Allison,

I am afraid we will be unable to use your article on
Bigger Thomas and Mr. Wright, although thank you for sending it
to us. Since "Native Son" is continuing, the basis for the article
seems to have vanished, at least for the moment. I am sorry.

Sincerely,

Lewis Nichols

"ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO PRINT"

144 Steuben St.
East Orange, N. J.

OF "BIGGER" RICHARD AND ME

an article

by

Hughes Allison

Just about every factor in our entire American structure is involved with the euthanasian death of Richard Wright's and Paul Green's "Native Son!" The principal consideration though is: what will become of Bigger Thomas?

Now Bigger Thomas is a psychopath. He's a fellow whose speech is often profane. Frequently, Bigger's conduct is the quite absolute personification of obscenity.

He was born, a killer.

He couldn't die without first having killed, for then his life would have been wasted; would have signified--nothing. Bigger Thomas did kill. (Notice how the past and present tenses mix, blur; go back to the past; move up to the present; move on to the future....) He was caught as most murderers are. He went to the electric chair.

His family, his friends, his enemies, I, you, everybody--all of us knew him as a crack-brained, ugly, black, vicious and brutal menace. Nice to know he's no longer on Broadway where, with Canada Lee, he lived his life over and over and over....

So the play "Native Son" is no more. And if this is true, then Bigger Thomas is gone. We're glad.

But if we leave Broadway and walk along Forty-second Street--

in the right direction, away from the closed Burlesque Houses--we shall have to pass the New York Public Library. Or, perhaps, we might enter the place. Just for the fun of it, let's do go in.

Before the play "Native Son" there was a novel by the same name. Yes, the Library has the book. That obscene brute, Bigger Thomas, still lives within the novel's 359 pages.

Here, Bigger is neither visible nor audible--as he was in the flesh and bone of Canada Lee on the stage--and so he's not quite so powerful. But he's just as menacing. His manner of speech hasn't improved one lick of a curse. And he declares himself an imperfect creature--until he has killed. He does kill.

We must get rid of Bigger Thomas.

Books have been gathered in one big pile and burned before. There is a precedent for such a situation. However distant the precedent may have been set (was it in Nazi Germany where Jews and Catholic priests are also gathered and burned?), it is just an idea and its author has placed it in the public domain. We may use that idea without trespassing upon the "rights" of its author. We don't even have to go to Germany and ask him: may we? He'll understand.

Suppose, now that we have closed the play, we gather all the copies (every last one) of the book and burn them. Truly then "Native Son" will be no more. And of course we will have rid ourselves of that swearing, swaggering, dangerous and vicious Bigger Thomas! Well, almost; but not quite.

For Bigger Thomas isn't just a character in a novel and in a play. As he ought to be seen on Broadway, as he ought to be read in a book, Bigger Thomas is a sharp, clear, detailed study of a cancer which is eating away at the very guts of the Nation in which

130 million people are desperately trying to arrive at a practicable definition of Democracy.

Outside of "Native Son" Bigger Thomas exists--really exists--in the flesh. And that flesh isn't Canada Lee's either. By other names--like Joe and George and Bill and even Percy--Bigger moves among us. His tongue is a thousand times more filthy than Richard Wright would dare pen it on paper. His fingers itch and twitch to twine themselves about a throat and another throat and another--over and over and over....

Rub "Native Son" off of Broadway's boards. Burn all the copies of the novel, "Native Son!" And the real Bigger Thomas will go on living, multiplying, edging on to becoming fifteen million animals--waiting and watching for just one tiny, little chance. To kill.

Not all of these (when the multiplication process is well on its way) will fit the description: obscene, "wholly objectionable" A great many of these animals will look like human beings. Some of them will never utter a single profane word; will be as conventional as an archbishop; will observe and practice such conduct as would please Emily Post. And yet others of them, as of yesteryear and now and next year, will lurk in Central Park, in a Harlem hallway, in Newark's Third Ward, in Chicago's South Side, in every section of the land--either waiting to kill or waiting to be caught after having proved themselves worthy to die.

This (the lurking and waiting) isn't the obscene thing. The real obscenity is fixed in the fact that those animals who look and speak and act like human beings are troubled in their minds (sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously) about whether to join in on the lurking and waiting--now or later.

If these who are so very conventional do begin to lurk and

wait, when they do, who shall ask:

"Why no warning of this event? What caused this madness? Why wasn't this thing stopped before it began? Why did it have to happen to us?"

There was a warning: in "Native Son." The answer to the cause of madness answers the other questions--those asked above as well as any others which might arise.

Now I know all there is to know about "this madness"

For I am one of Bigger Thomas' blood kin.

I am a Negro. It doesn't really matter what kind of a Negro I am--whether I am black, all black, and ignorant and illiterate and gullible; or very fair, without a tint of African descent in my complexion, and well educated and exceedingly wise--the mere fact of my origin inextricably connects me with Bigger Thomas. And this connection established, it does not matter if my madness is greater than Bigger's or so slight that not even the most brilliant mental physician can detect the least evidence of it.

What does matter is, that like Richard Wright, I am still sane enough to speak of my madness.

Let me begin this way: I don't think that I was born, a killer. I don't think that unless I do kill before I die (I hope of natural cause rather than because of a rope about my neck) I shall enter death an imperfect thing. I don't think, as Richard Wright seems to think, that I ought to become a Communist in order to remove the cause of my madness. I don't think that the removal of democratic processes--among which is freedom of speech--will make me any more mentally competent than I am now.

But I do not know how long I shall think as I do now. I cannot say when or exactly under what circumstances my mind will change or when something (say unreasonable censorship) will mark the be-

ginning of the end of my mind's present state....

Here, I shall end this talk of my own individual madness. For I want to say more of my kin.

Richard Wright is the father (at least the creator) of Bigger Thomas whom I call my kin. That makes me Wright's kin too.

All I know about Richard Wright's background is what I have read and heard, since, on the few occasions we have met, I didn't question him about it and he didn't volunteer information. According to these sources, he was born on a Mississippi plantation, the son of a mill worker and country school teacher whose erratic moving about the country enabled the boy to get only a smattering of an education.

This much I know, not from a blurb or from hearsay: Richard Wright is a great writer, the best my race--my kin, the Thomases--have yet produced.

Of my ^{own background} ~~kin~~, there is this: I was born in the comfortable home of one of South Carolina's "Talented Tenth" families. That is: my folks can't remember when they weren't educated and didn't have property--and when they weren't Negroes, all of them, including my paternal grandfather who wore the Confederate Gray from the day of Secession until the day Lee surrendered. Including, too, my maternal grandfather who, as a Magistrate in Reconstruction days, often gave sanctuary in his home to refugees from both the Union League and the Ku Klux Klan. (One morning, so I am told, a League member and a Klansman had breakfast together in Grandpa Hughes' house. Neither used his fork.)

Once I had a play on Broadway. It was a Federal Theater production moved over from New Jersey to the Maxine Elliott Theater. It was to stay there only two weeks. It remained four weeks. It

was called "The Trial Of Dr. Beck" Hallie Flanagan, in her book "Arena", says that: "J. J. Shubert wrote me that 'The Trial Of Dr. Beck' was the best play he had seen anywhere on Federal Theater; and it was partly at his suggestion that we moved it to New York where it ran for four weeks"

I remember that commercial producers, including the Shuberts, made overtures to me about obtaining the right to use my play rather than the WPA. I remember, too, that members of the Communist Party didn't want "Dr. Beck" produced by anybody anywhere. And I cannot forget the religious folk who wanted this line or that one deleted, threatening to have the production "closed up" if the proposed cuts weren't made. I remember that Chicago (Bigger's home) Negroes used the N.A.A.C.P. to keep my play out of their city. I know that five hundred people had to sign a petition before "Dr. Beck" could be seen in Boston; that even the word "baby" had to be cut out of the script before my "child" (the word substituted) could play there.

And I know that neither the hot August weather nor lack of patronage caused "Dr. Beck" to quit Broadway after four weeks. "Orders" given by somebody somewhere (Washington? or Legion?) caused that euthanasia.

Now, not all Negroes are writers suffering for a want of free speech in books and plays. Negroes just suffer for want of equitable consideration with other people in the political, economic and social structure of this--is it, Democracy? That want is slowly but surely driving them insane. When one of these is honest enough to draw a blue-print of the more advanced stage of his people's condition, such a study is called "wholly objectionable"

But why subject this mere brainchild to euthanasia? Why not

do that to Richard Wright? And to me? And to all our kin and kith? If we are not now exactly as psychopathic--and so, as obscene--as the footlight Bigger we are still native sons. Why wait until the second or the third or a later anniversary of "the day of infamy" (December, 7th, Remember Pearl Harbor) to have the NEW YORK TIMES report the euthanasia of the real Thomases?

Or can't the so-called Legion of Decency make up its mind about that kind of murder?

Hughes Allison.